

El Salvadoran president officially apologizes for 1981 massacre

News

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El Mozote, El Salvador, January 19 (ENInews)--On the 20th anniversary of the end of the El Salvador civil war, President Mauricio Funes issued an emotional public apology for an infamous 1981 massacre of civilians by army troops.

Speaking 16 January in El Mozote, about 200 kilometers (120 miles) from the capital of San Salvador, Funes said, "For this massacre, for the abhorrent violations of human rights and the abuses perpetrated in the name of the Salvadoran state, I ask forgiveness of the families of the victims."

Soldiers from the now-disbanded Atlacatl battalion entered El Mozote 11 December 1981 looking for left-wing rebels and sympathizers. In two days, they slaughtered nearly 1,000 men, women and children. Bodies were tossed inside a church which was set on fire. It was the bloodiest single episode of El Salvador's 12-year civil war that left some 75,000 dead. Twelve thousand more disappeared during the conflict.

"I ask forgiveness of the mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers and sisters of those who still today do not know the whereabouts of their loved ones. I ask forgiveness from the people of El Salvador, who suffered an atrocious and unacceptable violence," Funes said in a speech in front of thousands of farmers at the massacre site, the Associated Press reported.

Under its program Communication for Peace, the Toronto-based World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) has supported several film documentary projects and workshops in El Salvador in the past few years to gain public acceptance of the need to come to terms with the country's violent past, according to a recent news release.

One of the documentaries, "Colima," focused on a mother whose daughter disappeared during the civil war and on the family's search for truth. The 2008 film was screened in cinemas throughout El Salvador and at festivals abroad and "facilitated the beginning of a judicial process of exhumation of the victims, their identification and the return of the bodies to their families," according to the WACC news release.

However, Msgr. Gregorio Rosa Chavez, the assistant bishop of San Salvador, observed "there is still a lot to do," even with the peace accords. "We have a lot of ground to make up in human rights," Chavez told the AP, "as there is in the economic situation of the poor, the poorest part of the population continues to be the poorest."